

Award-Winning Author to Discuss Impact of Oil, Gas Boom on Wyoming's Environment, Communities

Wyoming is “a hungry place, meanly guarding life [and] carelessly taking it back,” author Alexandra Fuller writes. It is home to cattle drives and rodeos, bone-chilling winds and vast high plains that test “men as worn as driftwood and salted women.”

America's least populous state also is home to sizable oil and gas reserves, and their extraction is damaging the environment and ravaging close-knit communities so that neither may be able to recover.

Fuller, who has lived in Wyoming for more than a decade, will share stories of the environmental and social changes brought on by oil and gas development at Penn State at 4 p.m., Monday, April 20.

Her talk, “The Heartbeat at the End of Our Light Switch: How Families, Communities and the Environment Pay with Their Lives for Our Energy,” is open to the public and is part of the Earth and Environmental Systems Institute's 2009 EarthTalks Spring Colloquium Series—“The Marcellus Shale Play: Boon or Burden?” A book signing will follow Fuller's talk in 26 Hosler.

The daughter of British expatriates, Fuller grew up in white-dominated Rhodesia during the civil war that would give birth to Zimbabwe, a childhood she wrote about in her family memoir, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight—An African Childhood*. When she moved to Wyoming in 1994, Fuller saw similarities between the two places in their beautiful but harsh environments and in the rugged stoicism of those who call them home.

Fuller first described Wyoming's energy culture in “Boomtown Blues: How natural gas changed the way of life in Sublette County” that appeared in *The New Yorker* in February 2007. That piece laid out the dark side of energy development: toxic-air alerts due to pollution, contamination of dozens of water wells, loss of critical wildlife habitat.

Researching the article led to another discovery: the high incidence of industry-related accidents and deaths in the Wyoming oil patch. One death—that of second-generation, 25-year-old oil worker Colton H. Bryant—is the subject of Fuller's most recent book, *The Legend of Colton H. Bryant*.

Fuller's portrait of Bryant is both personal and political. Readers come to appreciate Bryant's unlikely optimism and his loyalty to family and friends, but they also come to see Bryant's death as the inevitable consequence of America's obsession with cheap energy.

The drilling company that employed Bryant, Fuller reveals in the book, was fined just \$7,000 for the six safety violations that contributed to his fall from an oil rig and his death.

Fuller recognizes the energy boom has brought welcome financial resources to Wyoming. Royalty payments have funded scholarships at the University of Wyoming and construction of extended-stay hotels, athletic facilities and courthouses throughout the state.

But she insists oil and gas development must be done in a way that does not ravage the environment and harm the people who depend upon that environment.

“None of us want the oil and gas industry to go away in Wyoming, but we need to find a way that it’s not going to kill us, it’s not going to kill our land and it’s going to keep our communities intact,” Fuller has said. “What I want people to understand is that our decision to make energy such an urgent priority has a real human cost.”

The 2009 EarthTalks Spring Colloquium Series—“The Marcellus Shale Play: Boon or Burden?”—is sponsored by the Earth and Environmental Systems Institute, the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences (EMS), the College of Agricultural Sciences, the Environment and Natural Resources Institute, the Penn State Institutes of Energy and the Environment (PSIEE), the EMS Energy Institute and the John A. Dutton e-Education Institute.

The Rock Ethics Institute is a special sponsor of Fuller’s talk.